



## Equatorial Guinea

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2009**

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 10,827 square miles and a population of 750,000. Christians account for approximately 93 percent of the population, of whom Roman Catholics constitute 87 percent; 6 percent belongs to Protestant and independent denominations. Many Catholics reportedly also follow traditional beliefs. Five percent of the population practices indigenous religious beliefs exclusively. Muslims, Baha'is, and practitioners of other religious beliefs each constitute less than 1 percent of the population. The number of Muslims is increasing due to the growing number of West African and Middle Eastern immigrants.

#### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. However, the Government remains sensitive to criticism, and church leaders usually avoid discussions that could be construed as critical of the Government or government officials. The Constitution specifically mentions support for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.

The Government generally allows preaching, religious teaching, education, and practice by believers. The Government requires religious groups to obtain permission for any activities outside the confines of places of worship; however, in practice this requirement does not appear to hinder organized religious groups from holding retreats and other meetings. Door-to-door evangelism reportedly occurred without incident.

The Government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Corpus Christi, Immaculate Conception, and Christmas Day.

A 1992 presidential decree regulates the exercise of religious freedom. This decree maintains an official preference for the Catholic Church and the Reform Church of Equatorial Guinea. While the decree does not hinder the practice

of other religious beliefs, its effects can be observed in many events; for example, Catholic Masses serve as a normal part of any major ceremonial function, such as the October 12 National Day. In addition, Catholic and Reform church officials are exempt from airport entry and exit taxes.

The decree regulates the registration of religious groups. To register, churches must submit a written application to the Ministry of Justice, Worship, and Penitentiary Institutions. The Director General in the Ministry oversees compliance with the decree and the registration process. This application was not required of the Catholic and Reform churches.

The application and approval process may take several years, but such delay appears to be the result of bureaucratic inefficiency and not of policy designed to impede any religious group. Groups that provide beneficial social programs, such as health projects or schools, reportedly are approved more quickly. Enforcement of registration requirements is inconsistent. Unregistered groups that operate can be fined. Such fines are rarely applied, but the Government periodically announced over the radio that any unregistered church was subject to fines or closure and should register as soon as possible.

The fundamental law on religion states that each person is free to study his or her religion and should not be forced to study another faith, but the reality is somewhat more complicated: Religious study is optional in public schools and can be replaced by a course in social/civic education; however, the secular course could be failed, whereas it is virtually impossible to fail religion class. Catholic schools have long been the best available option for many students, and non-Catholics are expected to participate in daily Catholic lessons and prayers in those schools. In recent years more Protestant churches have opened and grown; some of them, including Reform Church, evangelicals, Seventh-day Adventists, and Baptists operate their own primary and secondary schools.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

The Government continued to emphasize that the role of religion and of religious leaders is purely spiritual and discouraged the clergy's political criticism of the Government.

Some non-Catholic pastors who also worked for the Government as civil servants continued to report that their supervisors strongly encouraged participation in religious activities related to their government positions, including attending religious events such as Catholic Masses.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who were abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

#### Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.